UNITED
NATIONS

WORLD CONFERENCE ON
NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION

Yokohama, Japan
23-27 May 1994

Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.172/7/Add.2
22 April 1994

Original: ENGLISH

Item 10 (a) of the provisional agenda *

NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Technical session

Addendum

Vulnerability and development

Summary of presentation by Dr. Richard Jolly, Deputy Executive Director, UNICEF

1. Over the years, as the world population continues to increase, putting pressure on limited resources, environmental degradation and overwhelming poverty become crucial elements contributing to the frequency and impact of natural disasters. These factors of poverty, population growth and environmental degradation are the underlying causes of vulnerability and must be tackled if disaster mitigation is to be achieved. The long-term goals of development work address the same problems, demonstrating the inseparable relationship between emergencies and the developmental process.

2. One fifth of the world's population lives in absolute poverty. Poverty is the fundamental reason why certain societies are more vulnerable to disasters than others. As is widely recognized, as long as poverty and social inequalities persist in the world, the potential for disaster is enormous. The only viable long-term solution is to vigorously support vulnerable communities, especially the women who bear the major responsibility for the survival of their families.

3. Population growth is also a major factor in increasing vulnerability to disaster. It perpetuates poverty by increasing pressure on scarce resources of land, finance and capacity for provision of basic services. Population growth is exacerbated by poverty. In poverty stricken societies, families still rely on large numbers of children as an economic necessity.

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* A/CONF.172/1.

4. Environmental degradation is becoming an ever greater threat to the planet and to the future of our children. It is a well-known fact that changing climatic patterns brought about by environmental malpractice such as deforestation, overgrazing, pollution and global warming, contribute to the increased incidence of droughts and floods in various parts of the world.

5. It is recognized that many "natural" disasters can be prevented by the adoption of environmentally sound global policies. Natural hazards will always occur but, if environmental degradation can be contained, it is possible to prevent them from becoming disasters, or at least to minimize the damage caused by them.

6. Women are a key factor in any initiatives aimed at reducing vulnerability and their empowerment, physically (through health and nutrition programmes), socially (through education and training programmes) and economically (through income generation, credit schemes, agricultural extension and other household food security programmes), should be fundamental to all disaster management strategies.

7. For disaster mitigation to be successful, the strategy should be to train, educate, inform and empower the vulnerable communities to assess their own risks and their own vulnerabilities; to analyse their own situation, recognize their own coping strategies, assess their own needs and plan their own choices and actions, in collaboration with local and national governments.